

Subject: Journey to Roots: Roma in India**Date:** Thu, 31 May 2001 23:14:15 -0000**From:** "Mr. Ariel Eliyahu" <eli-ari@inter.net.il>**To:** <AvenAmentza@yahoogroups.com>

Newspapers' clippings on International Conference on Roma Heritage & Culture:
Journey to Roots organised at Chandigarh (India) on 12 April, 2001

by

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Roma delegates reach city

Express News Service

(India Express, Chandigarh - 12 April, 2001)

"IT is like a homecoming, a journey back to our roots, a place where we actually belong", said a jubilant Vania De Gila-Kochanowski (Roma scholar from France), as he stepped out of the bus, which brought large number of Roma (Gypsies) poets, writers, scholars, artists, dancers and musicians from various European countries to the city today.

Sukhna Lake came to a standstill as Dev Bhardwaj, Director, India Inter-Continental Cultural Association, along with 21 Roma delegates reached the spot to the beats of dhol. Many local literary personalities were also present at the lake to welcome the delegates, who are here for an international conference on Roma Culture and Heritage 'Journey to Roots', to be held on April 12 in Chandigarh. The participants arrived from France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Macedonia, Yugoslavia, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.

The conference will take place at the auditorium of the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Sector 10 at 10.30 am.

Advisor to the UT Administrator Neeru Nanda will be the Chief Guest on the occasion. The conference will highlight the causes and consequences of Roma's (ancient migrants from India) journey away from their roots and the will to re-root themselves. Well-known Roma scholar W. R. Rishi will be the guest of honor.

Coming Back to Roots

by Dharminder Kumar

(Indian Express, Chandigarh, 13 April, 2001)

I travelled , travelled long roads,
Everywhere meeting happy gypsies.
Oh gypsies, where do you come from,
With tents on this happy road?
Romani national anthem

Home. These four letters have never spelled so much for any other community. For Roma, it was not the agony of homelessness alone; it was also the ache of amnesia that their caravans carried through the whole world. After hundreds of years of solitude, the caravan has trundled back home. About a century of scholarship has given a community its homeland. The most despised people in the world, those who bore the collective shame of being called thieves, sorcerers and knaves have now been recognised to be Indians, Punjabis, in fact. For Roma, the beginning of history means end of humility. About a score of them came to city to attend International conference on Roma Culture and Heritage, Journey to Roots, and felt right at home, as many of them would choose to say.

Meri Behna

Between Lilliana Kovachevia and Dev Bhardwaj pops up a spectrum of ROMA-PUNJAB ties. Lilliana, Director of school of Romani Children in Bulgaria is Dev's rakhi sister. Dev, the well known Punjabi poet who organised the conference, has a thing about literary friendships across countries. Lilliana came to India to learn Hindi and both planned this conference which caps up Lilliana's year long stay in India. They are also working on a dictionary of common Romani-Punjabi words and a Roma Who's Who which will include famous Roma personalities in all the spheres of life. Dev's literary journal, Kafila, has been known for its cosmopolitan content. He has published Lilliana poems in his journal and is now translating them into Punjabi and English.

As Indian as you

If Dr Emil Scuka keeps mum, anybody would take him for an Indian. When you tell this to the Czech President of International Romani Union, he gives a smile and tells his interpreter that he feels proud. While addressing the conference, Scuka reflected a manner of speech which was slightly similar to the hearty strains of Dev whose gregariousness, steeped in broad Punjabi idioms, missed nothing of the regional hospitality. "Roman bhainan te bharaavan da asin unhan de purkhian di dharti te swagat karde han," Dev spoke. Scuka didn't only match Dev's spirit but went few steps further. Lilliana interpreted for the audience the bright warm fragments of Scuka's speech. "All Roma people around the world are ambassadors of Indian culture," he declared, giving a charming twist to the new found relationship. He spoke with an amazing directness. His rhetoric has it a sense of urgency which could grow out of nothing but sheer compassion. "We don't want to forget our past, We don't want to forget our forefathers, we don't want to be lonely" said Scuka. Each sentence scored over the other in its potency. "Our children read about Indian history. Believe me our children know you, recognise you." The hand of friendship he extended was as warm as of those extended for him. "We want our children to come here and learn your language and you send your children to learn our language."

Dil Hai Hindustani

Hristo Kyuchukov, the general secretary of International Romani Union says that India reminds him of his childhood. "My father used to tell me a lot about India. He used to say I must know a lot about India," says Hristo. His father brought Raj Kapoor movies home and Hristo found a window to his imaginary homeland. "My mother used to sing Hindi songs," Hristo recalls. His first visit to India is a grand realisation of what was a heartfelt of images and songs. Hristo is a professor of linguistics and finds his fascination for India not only emotional but also intellectual. He tells you that Romani is a dialect of Punjabi. "We call snake sapp, ear kann, nose nakk and legs tang," Hristo illustrates. Yak, dui, trin are one, two, three in Romani. A starched white kurta payajamas glosses his raw administration for things Indian. "Now I will go to my Romani classes wearing this dress," He has bought quite a few of them. When his wife Shpresa Spohiu, who is a social worker told her people that she was going to India they were frightened. "They said India was dangerous," she says. She is happy that her people have been proven wrong. "India does something to you. Every Western must come here once to get a fresher perspective on life," she adds.

A Kashmiri Slovak

KLARA ORGOIANOVA, a delegate from Slovak Republic, is a psychologist who is now working with an NGO. "Don't I look like a Kashmiri?" she says shyly. "Lots of people said that," she adds. She finds Indians modest and full of peace. It was her first visit to India but due to the organisational goof ups she could not enjoy it as much as she looked forward to. In Delhi, she had some unpleasant experiences which she assures you, have done nothing to tarnish the image of India. She herself comes from musicians caste which is considered prestigious among Roma. But not many in her community are well off. "Roma in Slovak are going down and down. A large number of them still live in ghettos. Government says it needs money to improve their lot. Though there is not enough money the way it is used also compounds the problem," she tells you. But she is very optimistic about the future of Roma in her country. She tells you there are about 200 NGOs working for Roma in her country. She and her companion Zuzana have been to Rishikesh and are now going to Nepal for trekking.

'Forgotten' Romas return to trace their roots

by Nonika Singh

(Hindustan Times, Chandigarh - 13 April, 2001)

'THEY COME from far flung places, men women and children, they are the Roma dressed in rags, walking through mud they are drawn by promises of land'. Extracts from a poem 'Only ashes remain' By Balram Haiiti.

And is exactly this search for a homeland, which brings these 'forgotten children' represented through a delegation to India the country they left centuries ago reasons lost in pages of unwritten history.

The International conference on Roma culture and heritage : journey to roots unfolded at the Government Museum and Art Gallery Auditorium. With host of eminent scholars including W.R. Rishi - an authority on Roma's history and Janardhan Singh Pathania participating in the conference, many issues concerning these men and women severed

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from their soil now in search of their roots came to the fore.

Of course their Indian connection is by now a forgone conclusion discovered perchance by some visiting Indian scholars about 100 years ago who could not ignore the linguistic commonness especially with languages of north western states. Thus it is revealed that Roma languages has trace of Sanskrit, Hindi and Gujrati but like all migrants the tale of Romas too is not a 'happily ever after forever'.

Break with the past for them has also translated into a painful link with their adopted countries so much so that as Nikolai Georgi member of the delegation and also one of the speakers at the forum remarked, today our unique characteristics like physical appearances have become a stigma and for centuries we have been persecuted. From the mindless exterminations of their kind in Spain in 1492 to days of Hitler when genocide applied as much to them as to the Jew to the present day when their population in Europe might have touched 10 percent of the European population have not gotten any better. Why in nations like Czechoslovakia Republic 80 percent of Roma children are forced to go to schools meant for mentally challenged.

In the latest issue of Nandan magazine, he has contributed a story 'Roma char bhai' to introduce young generation to the existence of these extraordinary men and women whose ancestors had the courage to explore and who are enjoyed to us by a common heritage. Acceptance by Indian society of these persona non grata is perhaps no more that symbolic but emotional for why else they would spend money from their pockets to visit India. So a gesture laced with love and understanding can go a long way in providing balm to the wounds they have borne for centuries

Forgotten children of India visit home

by Aditi Tandon

(The Tribune, Chandigarh - 13 April, 2001)

Though the fact that Roma gypsies migrated from India came to light only about 300 years ago with the coming of the British to India, these nomads have been preserving the Indian element among themselves. Their character reflects Indian traits. Evidence that they were rooted to India comes from the fact that they, like us, call water 'pani' and eye 'aankh'.

No wonder then, that the 21 odd Roma delegates, who were in the city today to celebrate the 30th anniversary of International Roma Union, felt nostalgic. Many of them, who had come to the land of their origin for the first time, were touched by the warmth of the Indian people, especially the Rajasthani and the Punjabis and could not hide and their urge to be accepted by the Indian government as the "Forgotten children of India".

The day was all about Romas, their history, origin, immense struggles and misfortune in that they still have no "official" homeland. There were many experts deliberating upon the cause of Romas in the auditorium of the government museum and art gallery including the renowned French scholar, Vania de Gila Kachonowaski and the India Roma scholar Dr. W.R. Rishi. And while various chapters of history of these ancient children of India unfolded before one's eyes, one realized how deeply were they linked to India, and especially to Punjab, which had been home to many Roma clans.

The Tribune took the opportunity to share the pain of this nomadic tribe which has been involved in an incessant search for their identity. And after speaking to about six delegates, one could feel proud of the Indian lineage of these people who, despite their history of enslavement at the hands of the fascists forces, had maintained their dignity. Leader of the delegation, Dr Emil Scuka, was more than thrilled to be in India, "I have grown up loving Indian culture and language. In fact the Romani language is extremely close to Rajasthani, Punjabi and Gujrati. Indian hospitality is also known all over. I am glad to be heading this delegation, which is in India to attend the two-day conference on Roma culture and heritage - Journey to Roots, being organised by Hindu Heritage Pratishthan." He was also overwhelmed by the fact that the conference today culminated in some significant resolution which the Indians passed on the behalf of their Roma friends.

Significant among them are the official acceptance of Roma as the children of India, facilities for teaching Romani language in schools of India, setting up of India houses where Romas can come and assimilate Indian culture and fostering cultural exchange between Romas and Indians. The Romas were also enthralled by information from Dr. W. R. Rishi, who said that Shivalik Public School in Chandigarh offered the facility of free education to Romani children. "There are also three scholarships for Roma children, apart from one for a Roma research scholar, sponsored by ICCR."

Roma delegation, which comprises 23 members voices their struggle to be recognized. One delegate informed how in Czech Republic, Roma children were termed mentally incompetent and were required to study in special schools meant for physically and mentally-challenged. The delegates will leave for Delhi today and will also meet the Prime Minister and Home Minister.

While the future of the tribe remains uncertain, one heartening fact was the encouragement the UT administration officials extended. Among officials who attended today's celebrations were the Advisor, Ms. Neeru Nanda and

Director, Social Welfare, Ms. Madhavi Kataria who is also chairperson of the organizing committee for the conference. The delegation went to the Shivalik Public School to take a view of Dr. Rishi's Roma House. They were also honored by the office-bearer of the Sanatan Dharam Mandir.